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Editorial

THE ETHICS OF NONCONFORMITY

Most of the denominations of the Christian church that exist in the United States originated in some other country and have been imported into this country. Most of them would be in England or Germany nonconformists. In this country they are all free and equal before the law. Nonconformity, in the sense in which it is known in England, does not exist, because there is no standard to conform to. But nonconformity exists nevertheless, and is rapidly increasing. In every denomination men are holding today opinions which were undreamed of or strenuously opposed by those who founded the denomination, if not also by those who were the leaders of thought within it a generation ago. Presbyterians dissent from the views of Calvin and John Knox; Lutherans disagree with Luther; Methodists hold opinions that Wesley never entertained; within even so modern a body as the Disciples of Christ many have strayed from the opinions of Alexander Campbell.

What shall be said of the ethics of the situation? Are all these dissenters from the opinions of their spiritual ancestors traitors to the cause of true religion? Is such dissent immoral?

First of all, let it be observed that the spiritual ancestors of these dissenters have no case against them. They have suffered no wrong. In their own lives they did their thinking, independently or imitatively as they independently chose; did what they thought it right to do to influence the thinking of their own day, and by books and institutions to perpetuate their own type of thought beyond the measure of their lives. Many of them were dissenters from the views of their predecessors or from the majority of their contemporaries, and helped in their day to create a new theology, which in its turn became the old.

They lived their lives; they have no right of action against us if we follow in their footsteps and live ours. To each of them, if he come into court in the person of some self-appointed attorney, we may with good conscience answer: "Friend, we do thee no wrong when we also exercise the same liberty which in thy day thou didst exercise." He wrongs himself and his fellow-men who speaks in terms of light contempt of the thinking of the past and its struggles after truth. He robs himself who thinks the shortest path to truth is one that takes no account of the past. He betrays an unappreciative soul who feels no gratitude to the great thinkers that went before us, or reverence for them. But no generation owes it to any preceding generation to limit its thinking by the thoughts of a preceding age.

In the second place, no thinker owes it to the world to abstain from thinking lest it should disturb men's minds. Disturbance of mind is no more certainly an evil than the west wind that, while it makes men turn up the collars of their coats, sweeps the air of the city clean of its elements of impurity. Even if the past had gained a clear vision of all truth, and set it down in creed and book, it would not be a useless service to stir men's minds with doubt now and again, that they might gain for themselves a grasp upon the truth and make it, not a deposit gathering dust, but a realized and used possession, a bright and shining weapon for life's battle. It may be a debatable question to what extent it is advisable to suggest doubts that one does not himself feel, for the sake of stirring the stagnant depths of men's minds. But certainly he whose studies have led him honestly and deliberately to question the correctness of current opinions has little reason to fear to speak his question, in view of the fact that history has shown that the times when men have honestly spoken out their dissenting judgments have been in the end more productive of the best moral and spiritual results than the times of rigid conformity. Nor is the reason of this far to seek. Honest and courageous thinking, even if not wholly intelligent, breeds an intensity of conviction and a courage in action that are worth more than conventional conformity. And every attempt to determine just how much of current orthodoxy will stand the test of fearless criticism sends men back from the accidental and superficial and peripheral to the central and fundamental truths that cannot be shaken.

But, in fact, we have no occasion to assume that the past acquired and transmitted to us all truth. It is not well that we should belittle the past and boast overmuch of our new acquisitions. But he surely knows little of past or present who does not know that every day men are learning things that the past did not know, and are really, though slowly, adding to the sum of human knowledge, enlarging the horizon of human vision. It is true indeed that much that calls itself new truth is new, but not true; or true, but not new except to the man who thinks himself its discoverer; or both new and true, but unimportant. But there is no supreme court that is competent to pass on all supposed discoveries and determine their right to be given to the world. That we may go forward; that, whether we go forward or stand still, we may hold what we hold with clear and living conviction, not with the stiffened grip of intellectual death, even disturbers of our intellectual peace must not be arrested and imprisoned until a jury of their peers has had time to determine whether what they are bringing to us is truth or error; and by that time they need not be thus restrained.

But the real question in our day and land is whether the thinker of new thoughts shall think within the body to which he belongs, or must pay for the privilege by withdrawing from it. Is nonconformity either a wrong to the denomination, to be punished by expulsion, or a privilege, to be purchased by withdrawal?

Let it be granted that there are causes which might justly demand the withdrawal of a member from a Christian church, and that might even justify his expulsion. Whatever may be true under a state church, no voluntary religious organization can be expected continuously to carry the burden of members the immorality of whose lives, or the intolerance of whose spirit, or the factiousness of whose conduct, defeats the very ends for which the organization exists. The interests of the many cannot be sacrificed to the preferences of the few.

Let it be granted also that there must be limits to the differences of opinion that may exist within any body of men who are to work together, and that this principle applies to a Christian church or denomination. Mohammedans and Roman Catholics and Unitarians would find it difficult to worship together to the edification

of any of them, or to work together in religious matters for the benefit of anyone else.

But these are only academic questions. The practical problem today is whether a man who is in the church of his present choice, even if originally there by the accident of birth, is bound to leave it or ought to be excluded from it, not because he is no longer in sympathy with its aims and tendencies, not because he has surrendered his Christian faith, but because he is no longer in agreement with certain doctrinal opinions of the majority of the body to which he belongs. We hold that the sole test which any church or denomination ought to set up is, not what will tend to the maintenance of opinions formerly held in the body, but what will, on the whole and in the large, tend to the enlightenment and welfare of men. And to this question, while it may be difficult to return specific answer in individual cases, there can be no doubt what the general answer should be. The church that would be effective, that would win and hold the allegiance of thinking men, and continue to serve its day and generation, must give to its members large liberty of individual thought and belief.

It must do this because narrow limitation of opinion tends to intellectual dishonesty or to intellectual stagnation. Human nature, even in truly religious men, is not beyond the reach of the temptation to conceal thought or to stop thinking, if the privilege of free thought must be purchased by denominational emigration. The association of a man with the church in which he has lived from his youth is a real asset of the spiritual life. It cannot, it ought not to be, lightly sacrificed. But if denominational conformity is to be strictly insisted upon, many men must choose between sacrificing the valued and helpful associations of life, and the surrender of honest and frank thinking. It is not wise unnecessarily to force upon men this choice. Especially is this unwise in view of its effect upon the minds of the young. For it inevitably creates the impression that conformity is more virtuous than honesty and frankness.

A large measure of freedom ought to be freely granted, because the denial of it tends to schism and the multiplication of sects. This is in itself an evil, and a serious one. It emphasizes the differences—often relatively unimportant differences—between denominations, and minimizes the great central and cardinal features of the Christian

religion. It generates faction and rivalry where there should be harmony and unity. It consumes in strife the energy that should be spent in effective work for the unfortunate and the sinning. Doubtless there must be denominations. We cannot all see alike, even in those things in which we must be in measurable agreement in order to work in harmony. But the progress of Christianity will be marked in no small measure by the extent to which we can work harmoniously with men of like purpose and character, though differing with us in opinion.

Again, a large measure of liberty of opinion ought to be granted, because only thus can the church make that progress in knowledge that is needful for its greatest effectiveness. That the church of the past has again and again accepted and defended as vital truth opinions that further investigation has proved to be untenable is so plain a matter of history that none can for a moment deny it. It is no disgrace to the church that her officers and leaders once held the Ptolemaic theory of the place of the earth in the universe. Theologians can no more transport themselves to future centuries than other thinkers. But it is a blot upon her record, it was a stupendous blunder, that the church undertook by persecution to hold men to that theory against its younger rival, the Copernican theory. We cannot fairly find fault that theologians once held to the inerrancy of the books of the Bible; they were heirs of the past, and of necessity of its errors as well as of its truth. But it is not to the credit of the church that it deposed from its offices men whose studies had revealed to them the untenability of this position, and whose sense of scholarly responsibility led them to declare what they had learned. The right to make progress; to accept newly discovered truth, be it important or unimportant; to discard old error, be it small or great, is a right which no church can afford to surrender or to hold lightly. Least of all in this age of active thought and intellectual progress can it afford it.

But if we suffer men to remain in the church while dissenting from its cherished doctrines, are we not in danger of being carried quite away from the old foundations into we know not what vagaries and errors? The question involves two assumptions: first, that we already know that the view of the dissenter is error—that he is wrong and we are right; and, second, that, in the comparison of truth and

error, truth is likely to be worsted. Both assumptions have some semblance of basis, it must be granted, in past history. Yet neither premise is wholly justified. The dissenter has a remarkable faculty of turning out to be right. And in the long run it is truth and not error that wins. Should not the church then be slow to invite the honest dissenter to leave? Given high character and honest intentions on the part of the holder of new opinions, it is surely better to trust the truth to win its way, than to create strife and division, and run the risk of fighting, not error, but truth, by demanding the withdrawal of the dissenter.

But how large liberty shall the dissenter expect, and the church grant? Liberty in the matters spoken of above is now granted. But other questions have come to the front. Men are now asking: What is the ultimate basis of authority in religion? Is the philosophical-miraculous the historically possible? What is the truth about the virgin birth of Jesus, and his resurrection? What is the relation of his death to the forgiveness of sins? And again the demand is repeated concerning those who question or deny the opinions commonly held on these subjects in past times: "If these men do not agree with us, let them go out from among us. Why do they disturb our peace?" Is this demand wise? Ought they to whom it is addressed to obey it? Ought they who offer it to desire that it should be followed? Is the course which they advocate for the interest of the truth and the church? The answer to the question depends ultimately on the question whether the dissenter's continuance in the denomination to which he belongs will contribute to the practical effectiveness of that denomination for the common ends of the Christian church. If the purpose for which the church exists is to promote human welfare through the promotion of intelligence, morality, and religion, and if fidelity to truth, and freely granted freedom to investigate and think, are more essential to the promotion of these ends than quietness of mind or the perpetuation of the views of the past, then he only should be asked to withdraw who by the immorality of his character, or the factiousness of his spirit and conduct, is seriously hindering the practical effectiveness of the church.